

Legacy of Colonialism, Tyranny of African Nationalism

Viewing Asian African Heritage Exhibition at the National Museums of Kenya

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The exhibition, *Asian African Heritage: Past and Present (2000-2005)*,¹ was staged at the time when forty years of African nationalism had promulgated into widespread discrimination against the Asians of East Africa. The display was about being Asian² and African. The two identity positions of the descendants of oceanic migrations were presented in a flux of economic, social, and political changes during British colonialism from the 1890s to the independence era of 1960. It was about being exclusive while safeguarding creed bonds, but inclusive in civic participation. It's this duality of private and national spaces that has fashioned the Asian African identity in the twenty-first century. While the focus of the exhibition was Kenya, its central praxis can be viewed broadly in the East African context.

This essay is written in the curator's voice and carries the exhibition's tone while maintaining the vantage of community view points and remembrances.

Rise of African Nationalism

The years following the independence of Kenya (1963) were filled with vibrant expressions of nationalism valorizing African Socialism³ while aspiring to capitalism. Politicians spoke about the three evils of colonialism: economic exploitation, waysiding African culture and racism. Asians in Kenya were pointed out as embodying these three evils.

Thus in the furore of political speeches inspiring equality and a desire for nationhood, Asian Africans came first to be excluded from the national re-formation of their homeland, and thereafter they were demonized by the State for their cultural and moral failure *as a race* befitting African citizenship, traditions and communalism. Making them 'the Others' in their birth land was meant to publicly humiliate the community that albeit carried trappings of sub-colonial behaviour from the recent days of the Empire when race and class overlapped. As it was intended, the rhetoric invited cheers for the leaders at political rallies and sustained their popularity even when signs of dictatorship, corruption and tribalism that bred poverty were visible. The latter was declared as the product of Asians 'milking the economy.'

Over generations Asian community funds had developed amenities for the benefit of their select religious, ethnic and caste persons. This had created inward looking self-sustaining diverse groups within the three race boxes set up by the apartheid system. However later, in the post-independence era, though the institutions opened their doors to all, resentment against the Asian presence persisted. The hatred was allowed to flourish as were the violent ethnic confrontations, while the new government vigorously pursued in footsteps of colonialists entrenching the class society and fear of diversity. In such a synthetic ambience, a four-pronged state propaganda was launched against the community:

Indian women. “Why don’t Asian girls marry Africans?” was a frequent question, inferring to Asian marriage customs as contradictory to African, and thus implicitly racist. However, the attack on the Indian woman was felt by the community as an assault on the family and values. Like the Indian, the African politician was born into patriarchy.⁴ The show of masculinity by male nationalists over others has been a global phenomenon.⁵ In nearby, Zanzibar for example, after the revolution in 1964, there were threats of forced marriages of Indian, Arab and Persian school girls to polygamous black army officers and ministers. And when forced marriages did take place, some angry and humiliated fathers and brothers who protested were sentenced to one year’s imprisonment and 24 strokes.⁶ However, most Asians would not openly argue against the intimidating power of Black nationalism for fear of being called racists, harassed and even deported.

Political Hectoring. After the independence of Kenya in 1963, there came a barrage of scathing presidential and ministerial speeches jeering Kenya’s Asians at public rallies. This created a nationwide hateful ebullience against the Indian behind the shop counter, the teacher in front of the classroom; clerks at the office desk, craftsmen in the workshop, students in school, and doctors in hospital uniforms.

Theatre. When President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania translated Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* into Swahili, the most widely spoken language in East Africa, its vocabulary was appropriated by Kenyan politicians into their anti-Asian diatribes and then applied to the new theatre. The oriental visage of Shylock the Jew magnificently fitted the Indian money-making storekeeper carrying the weighing scale. Like Shylock, he was feverishly protective of his daughter from those not of his kind and he loved gold. In bringing *The Merchant of Venice* home, the racial stigma of anti-Semitism transferred from Europe to East Africa. “Jews of Africa” was the other name for the Indians in Africa from the early twentieth century.⁸ When the theme of *The Merchant of Venice* was put to local context in serial TV plays satirizing Indian otherness and greed, it echoed the polemics of nationalism. So popular were the comedies that the drama’s diction transcended into everyday street, office and campus talk, and continues to this day. Finally, an all Africa award-winning play with a strong anti-colonial mass appeal, portrayed the bourgeoisie of Kenya exclusively as a Gujarati buffoon.⁹

Needless to say, the emerging politician businessmen who saw the Asian commercial class in its way, were pampered by the growing expatriate corporate society appearing sympathetic to the general population while tutoring black politicians into the new age of democracy and neo-colonialism.¹⁰

School Curriculum. The new Kenya school curriculum rightly favoured African perspectives in an attempt to unite a nation of multiple ethnicities. However, the heritage of the descendants of oceanic migrations was noticeably minimized. Indian trading and working classes were not only the makers of towns, commerce, and infrastructure but also of modern Kenya as noted by the celebrated Kenyan novelist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o.¹¹ What was omitted was that Indians ran a free press, workers’ union and the civil society taking the first steps towards radicalization, freedom, and the making of a nation hand-in-hand with the Africans.¹²

Climax. In 1968, the anti-Asian policies culminated in nationalization of properties in Tanzania mainly targeting assets of Asians though not declared as such.¹³ For over a century, Asian Africans had moved around the three regions of Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, and had close relatives and business interests in the three regions. Then came the policy of banning Asian trades in rural areas. Ironically, it was often the forefathers of the “paper citizens” (as they were called), who had put up the first stores that initiated countryside commerce and the formation of towns. In 1968, the Africanization of jobs held by Asians in the government, parastatals, and industries affected the large wage earning class that had little or no capital. Finally, in 1972 came the expulsion order from President Idi Amin to Asians to leave Uganda in ninety days. A culture of silence, fear, withdrawal from radical politics, and secrecy developed among Asian Africans as the decade of the 60s slipped into the 70s.

Result. The community itself, befuddled as it was, split into several directions. There was mass emigration to the West that fuelled state bigotry against “the defectors” when nationalism sang the song of patriotism through the collective efforts of all citizens pulling together. At the same time, some Asian businessmen found the inter-ethnic rivalries, corruption, and greed of the political elites that a totalitarian state breeds, to their advantage. A handful became post-independence millionaires and began investing overseas, especially in Great Britain, in joint family ventures. Today, some of them are famously known as the Asian African Global Capitalists.¹⁴ The men and women in the street perceived this handful of Asians, called “the president’s cronies,” as a stereotype condemnation of the entire community.¹⁵ The prejudice intensified as the dictators became increasingly unpopular. Many, however, remained undecided or unable to emigrate. They were condemned for ‘sitting on the fence’.

Those who openly supported opposition parties, such as the Kenya People’s Party (KPU), were deported while others slipped into self-exile.¹⁶ Ultimately, some began to join the covert anti-dictatorship movements either directly as members,¹⁷ or indirectly through material support and other means. This was in keeping with the radical tradition against oppressive regimes from the colonial days.¹⁸

However, almost all Asian African intellectuals, writers and poets moved out of the country. The departure of the literati and journalists created a vacuum in the once-vibrant arts scene that for long was the community’s heimat in ethnic languages and English.¹⁹ Today, Asian African literature by diaspora writers mirrors the human side of the story that the exhibition represents. Among the writers are those who tell the missing stories of the *Brown Man (in) Black Country* (1981), as JM Nazareth titled his book. Another writer, Peter Nazareth, describes the predicament of living *In a Brown Mantle* (1972). All show concern about *The Day After Tomorrow* (1971), the suggestive title of Bahadur Tejani’s first novel.

Finally, it may be noted that what the Asian community endured under African nationalism was not unlike the pogroms against minorities of different racial or religious groups in the world history of nationalisms.²⁰ The humiliation of the commercial, intellectual and skilled ethnic minorities was not uncommon if not an inherent feature of pogroms that are vividly described in Jewish narratives and films depicting the rise of racism in Europe and Russia in the 20th Century.

The Discourse

Asian African Heritage: Past and Present generated a discourse on racial belonging, citizenship and identity in an African democracy. It’s about being exclusive in community affairs, and open, inclusive and civic in the public square. These are the two dichotomous spaces that the community has held over generations in East Africa.²¹

Today Asian citizen run Kenya-wide educational institutions, social foundations, medical centres and most importantly a free press are markers of civil societies to emulate. Yet, they originate in and continue to be maintained by cloistered racial and religious groups, volunteers and a few wealthy individuals. Therein is the embedded dilemma for the young and future generations of Asian Africans. They must address the legacy of colonialism and deal with African nationalism which means tackling racism within and without their communities while maintaining the civic spaces. It’s a heritage of twin responsibility in a class-structured racialized society of independent Kenya. The exhibition brought this discourse to the public square.

The Exhibition

The exhibition dioramas were built around three themes: The Labour Heritage, the Intellectual Heritage, and the Social Heritage from around the 1890s to the 1960s. Within these three themes, it was the intent of the curator to

juxtapose the secluded and civic facets of the community. The exhibition was designed using earth colours and simple wooden structures of walk-in galleries without glass or pedestals. It incorporated properties relating to the early working-class material culture and pictures creating immediacy so as not to have barriers between the viewers and the viewed upon. Visitors could board the *dhow* and be with the travellers. They could be near the railroad coolie at work or in the craftsman's shop and the Indian kitchen. They could be at the counter of the Indian store witnessing the birth of commerce. They could stand before the activists who voiced demands for racial equality and freedom, and shaped the making of the nation.

Descendants of the pioneers created ten key narratives in Frame Story, the literary genre that's closest to oral tradition. Sixty volunteers drew on memories from their families and communities to build the scenes. They were the community storytellers who would also serve as guides.

Each frame story focused on one central property. This essay takes a walk along the journey of over one hundred years, stopping at ten key properties that mark the Asian African history of East Africa.

Frame Story One: The Dhow. Visuals around the *dhow* depicted Indian slave and coolie sea routes on the Indian and Pacific Oceans from around the 1850s. The maps denoted the economic foundations of the British, French, and Dutch Empires in Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, South America, and the Caribbean. The entry to the exhibition required a climb up the stairs to board the *dhow* and mingle with the travellers. The *dhow* itself was a walk-in gallery, displaying goods and documents on the inside wall of the prow, while the immigrants sat on the deck. A walk through the rocking boat led to the landing scene. Here the viewer disembarked into the history of the Indian Ocean merchant trade and inland routes. There was a case of coins and bank notes dating back to early 1900s signifying commerce. A picture of the fifteenth century Fort Jesus in the old town of Mombasa built by Indian workers opened to the history of labour.

Frame Story Two: Laying the Railroad. The diorama on coolie labour starts in 1896. Of the 32,000 railway coolies and skilled workers, some remained behind to reclaim and farm the hostile, swampy, or arid lands rejected by the white settlers. Sixteen coolies per mile became permanently disabled and were shipped back to India for replacement from their villages, according to the contract agreements. About half as many, approximately 2,500, were killed by diseases, exhaustion, and animals. That made four deaths per mile.

Frame Story Three: Building the Road. The building of the road is described in a series of illustrations from the graphic journal of Mohamed Sadiq Cocker, an assistant draughtsman in the road construction team of workers and technicians between 1926 and 1929. In such personal anecdotes as the strikingly visual commentary sketched by the roadside in the African hinterland, the exhibition opened family archives to public view.

Frame Story Four: The Oxcart. At the cartwright workshop stood a handcrafted oxcart from Kericho, a town situated in the heartland of the former White Highlands and the plantation economy. The wheels for animal and hand carts made by the Indian craftsmen were a critical tool for the export of coffee and tea and for the vital imports of the time. By the 1930s agricultural produce became the strength of the colonial economy, and the basis of further European settlements. The exhibition path links imagery of transportation by rail, road, and the oxcart that began the process of modernization.

Frame Story Five: Workshops. Other workshops of tradesmen symbolized specialized services that skilled Asian pioneers provided. The blacksmith, carpenter, and tinsmith supplied building and repair-making skills, and made handy products that the Empire needed to function, establish, and advance. The site of the mason laying a foundation stone represented the beginnings of urbanization and modern architecture. In this manner was laid the foundation of

the post-coolie-era settlement of merchants, technicians, and professionals that was to cultivate an independent self-sustaining society and economy.

Frame Story Six: The Bazaar Walk. The walk ushers visitors into a bustle of thriving small-scale trades and businesses: a grocery store; a textiles and tailoring shop; a general store carrying household items. Farming tools, personal, and home necessities were available in the Indian bazaar. All the races converged here from their otherwise segregated residences. The walk along the street exhibits featured the beginning of businesses that ultimately led to the growth of towns. There was also a bead store that told the story of how the Indian bead merchant and his wife, the Bead Bai, provided aesthetic material that heightened indigenous art and cultural traditions.

Frame Story Seven: The Ornaments and Stone Mill. The pioneers were self-supportive, often relying on their families, village folk and religious communities who had come before them. The ones who prospered helped their kinsfolk. Stories are told of Jamal Dewji and Allidina Visram as forefathers of the Khoja merchants, who took penniless teenagers disembarking from the *dhow*s into their care and taught them to trade. The same was the story of craft castes and families. Some merchant class migrants came with their savings, and some had ornaments that their wives carried on their bodies. In times of need, women sold or pawned their sacred dowry to help the families to survive. In some families, success of businesses is spoken of in sacrificial tales of women's jewellery and their labour on the stone hand mill. The exhibition showed both these items.

Frame Story Eight: Civic Society. For the pioneers, spirituality, community identity, and work ethics were central and intertwined. The railway coolie is seen praying by the railroad. The coolie-poet Roshan begins his poetical address to Colonel Patterson with God's name²² Baghali Shah the railway worker became a *seyed* at the Mackinon Road Station. Each day, before they began their work, carpenters, masons, and blacksmiths, comprising master craftsmen castes from India, prayed to their specific deity, giver of skills, tools, and the daily bread. A saw, marigold flowers, silver coins, and incense were next to the deity's colourful picture on the puja altar of the Gujarati Gajjar Suthar carpenter's shop. Mohamed Sadiq Cocker in the road builders' team was an ardent Sufi. Puran Singh, the master carpenter and maker of oxcarts, is revered as a Sikh *sant* (saint) of Kenya. Sewa Haji Paroo, a devout Khoja, built the first open-to-all races hospital in Dar-es-salaam and a multiracial school in Bagamoyo, Tanganyika. An exhibit of a stone-laying ceremony showed elements of worship of the Kutchi mason. Under each ornate building of urban East Africa is a prayer said for blessings of the new land. Guru Gobind Singh's apparition on a white horse makes the site of the Makindu Sikh temple as sacred earth. At this midway station, Indian workers fuelled the steam engines, lived, and worshipped. Two Asians, a devout Shia Moslem and a devout Sikh, bequeathed gardens to their hometowns for public resting places. These were A.M. Jevanje in Nairobi and Puran Singh in Kericho. Such visual snippets reflected on the community's broader civic work. Philanthropy and religion have been integral to the Asian African family's social esteem, honour, and identity.²³

A section of panels shows portraits of Asian African social workers, nurses, teachers, and midwives. Fatima nurse, Jena nurse and Salu ni Ba appear to pose for what looks like a memorable photograph presented at the exhibition. Another memorable photograph is of Dr. Ribeiro, the most loved doctor of Nairobi, riding a zebra. How he made his rounds on a zebra, and how he detected signs of the bubonic plague that ultimately led to the burning of the Indian bazaar two times, is spoken of as a legend. Then the story is told of how once-prosperous businessmen were reduced to poverty because their stores and homes were burned down. One picture tells the story of the only lady counsellor of Mombasa in 1940s. The picture shows her in a sari among a group of all-male councillors in European-style suits.

In one century in East Africa, the first generation of Indian immigrants built rest houses for travellers and then schools, libraries, and health clinics. Later, they started relief and welfare schemes for the poor in their communities. In the second to fourth generations, their welfare structures reached out to the wider Kenyan society. While they make a significant impact on the collective Asian African group identity, they remain distinct as exclusive groups of Sikhs, Arya Samajis, Oshwals, Ismaili and Ithna Asheri Khojas, Bohoras, Lohanas, and others.

Frame Story Nine: Intellectual Heritage—Writers, Journalists, Political and Social Reformers. The printing press of S Viyarhi, who fought for freedom of expression in Kenyan languages and was often imprisoned, stood beside panels of book covers of writings by Asian Africans and portraits of journalists, political, and social reformers. One portrait among several others, was of young Makhan Singh, the founder of the trade union movement in Kenya.²⁶ The portrait of photojournalist Mohamed Amin, who brought the famines in Africa to world attention, was mounted beside his camera on a tripod. This East African panel was on the milestones of history in making.

Frame Story Ten: Portrait of a Minority. Pictures from community plays, sports clubs, and temple-based arts such as the Indic swastika designs and rangoli, the feminine floor art, represented exclusive community cultural events.

Finally as a closure there was a wall of montage in sepia presented faces, attires and postures of a people of diverse languages, customs, and beliefs. At this juncture the Asian African display linked with exhibits of Bantu, Nilotic and Cushitic ethnicities in the National Museum's ethnographic gallery. The forty-odd groups largely live in exclusive cultural diversities yet collectively display one national identity. The Asian African Heritage Exhibition was the missing link in the text.

One comment in the visitors' book at the exhibition was, "I did not know Indians were important in Africa"—a telling statement on the pervasive influence of the colonial text and nationalist propaganda on the perception of Asian Africans.

Notes

¹ See the exhibition brochure:

<http://allafrica.com/download/resource/main/main/idadcs/00010156:d79f24a32c19589e3d389fcbd5baf6b6.pdf>. And also <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPcap/2000-03/15/064r-031500-idx.html>

² The term Asian is used here to mean descendants of migrants from the Indian subcontinent, present-day India, and Pakistan. It also covers descendants from Bangla Desh and Afghanistan.

³ Kenya. *African socialism and its application to planning in Kenya*. No. 10. Govt. Printer, 1965.

⁴ In March, 2014 Kenya's male-dominated parliament passed a bill making it legal for a man to marry another woman without the wife's consent. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26681580>.

⁵ Nagel, Joane. "Masculinity and nationalism: gender and sexuality in the making of nations." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21.2 (1998). Web. 2 Dec. 2010.

⁶ Hameer, Fidahusseini, *Crying Out For Freedom: The Event of Forced Marriages in 1970s – Zanzibar*. United Kingdom. Sun Behind the Cloud Publications Ltd. 2014. Print.

⁷ In one instance, eight Asian African leaders were deported overnight by Jomo Kenyatta under charges that could not be brought to court. Some were involved in the independence movement.

Archives of Africana Orientalia Online Group <https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/africana-orientalia/info>

Shah, Ramnik, *The Nationality Factor in the Migration of Gujaratis to East Africa and Beyond* in Gujarati Communities Across The Globe: Memory, Identity and Continuity (eds) Mawani, S and Mukadam, A. Trentham Books, London. January 2012

Also see note 16.

⁸ Horowitz, Terry Fred. *Merchant of Words: The Life of Robert St. John*. Rowman & Littlefield, 2014. Print.

⁹ Mugo, Micere Githae and wa Thiong'o, Ngũgĩ. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*. East African Publishers, 1976. Print. The play won first prize at the African Cultural Festival in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977.

¹⁰ Chua, Amy. *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*. United Kingdom. Heinemann, 2006. Print.

¹¹ Kapila, Neera. *Race, Rail and Society: Roots of Modern Kenya*. Nairobi. Kenway Publications, 2009. Print.

¹² Durrani, Shiraz. *Never Be Silent : Publishing & Imperialism in Kenya; 1884-1963*. United Kingdom. Vita Books, 2000. Print.

Gregory, Robert. *Quest for Equality: Asian Politics in East Africa 1900-1967*. India. Orient Longman, 1993. Print.

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Singh, Makhan. *History of Kenya's Trade Union Movement to 1952*. Nairobi. East African Publishing House, 1969. Print.

¹³ Aminzade, Ronald. *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Post-Colonial Africa: The Case of Tanzania*. Cambridge University Press, 2013. Print.

¹⁴ Oonk, Gijsbert. *Settled Strangers: Asian Business Elites in East Africa (1800-2000)*. SAGE Publications India, 2013. Print.

¹⁵ Chua, Amy. *World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability*. United Kingdom. Heinemann, 2006. Print.

¹⁶ Rattansi, Piyo. "Pranlal Sheth, Conscientious Lawyer Who Championed the Rights of the Marginalised." *The Guardian*, July 27 2003. <<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2003/jul/28/guardianobituaries>>

¹⁷ Gona, George. *Zarina Patel: An Indomitable Spirit*. Nairobi. Mvule Africa Publishers, 2014. Print.

¹⁸ See *Awaaz Magazine* <<http://www.awaazmagazine.com/>> for articles on Asian African historical personalities and events that have made a marked difference in political and social spheres in Kenya from last century to the present.

¹⁹ Shah, Ramnik. *The Exodus Revisited - Harvest of a Colonial Fruit* in *Awaaz* November, 2011

<http://www.awaazmagazine.com/previous/index.php/archives/item/213-the-exodus-revisited-harvest-of-a-colonial-fruit>

²⁰ Finzsch, Norbert, and Dietmar Schirmer. *Identity and Intolerance: Nationalism, Racism, and Xenophobia in Germany and the United States*. Cambridge University Press, 2002. Print.

²¹ Examples of these are Nankank Hospital, M P Shah Hospital, Dr. Ribeiro Goan School, The Rahimtulla Trust, Mohamedally and Maniben Rattansi Educational Trust, and Aga Khan University.

²² Patterson, John Henry. *The Man-Eaters of Tsavo*. London: Macmillian, 1907. Print.

²³ Gregory, Robert G. *The Rise and Fall of Philanthropy in East Africa: The Asian Contribution*. Transaction Publishers, 1992. Print.

orientalia@yahoogroups.com> or <EAcircle@yahoogroups.com>

²⁶ Patel, Zarina. *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh*. Nairobi. Zand Graphics, 2006. Print.

²⁷ "Tharia Topan." *Khojawiki*. KojaWiki. Web. 2015. <http://khowiki.org/Tharia_Topan>.

About the writer

Sultan Somjee (PhD McGill), is an ethnographer and has curated several exhibitions and published widely. He curated the *Asian African Heritage: Past and Present Exhibition* (2000 – 2005) while he was the Head of Ethnography at the National Museums of Kenya. Thereafter, he wrote *Bead Bai* (2012) and *Home Between Crossings* (2016). Both books are about the Asian African experience from the 1900s to 1970s. In 2001 the United Nations named Dr Somjee one of the twelve global "Unsung Heroes of Dialogue Among Civilizations" in recognition of his foundational work on Museums of Peace in regions of ethnic conflicts in eastern Africa. In 2002 Dr Somjee was appointed on the Global Advisory Board of Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies.

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